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ABSTRACT

This report explores changes in school policies and practices resulting from an externally mandated, high-stakes testing program. It is based on a study that investigated one Minnesota school district's transformation following the passage of a 1993 law mandating a results-oriented graduation rule. The paper outlines the role of testing programs and the accountability function of externally mandated, high-stakes testing. It states that the reliance on accountability stems in part from the belief that high-stakes testing is necessary to stimulate teachers, students, and administrators. The text details the background of assessment-based educational accountability systems and lists some common features of assessment-based educational accountability theories of action. It reports a study where stakeholders were interviewed using an open-ended, semi-structured protocol. The questions focused on interviewees' perception of how the district or schools had changed since the introduction of the Minnesota Basic Standards Test (MBST), the current and/or future responses made as a result of the MBST, and needs at the building and/or district level. Results show that educators felt that a positive aspect of the testing policy was that it highlighted the needs of some students who otherwise may have slipped through the cracks. Five tables provide synopses of schools' responses to MBST. (RJM)

An In-Depth Investigation of One School District's Responses to an Externally-Mandated, High-Stakes Testing Program in Minnesota

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An In-Depth Investigation of One School District's Responses to an Externally-Mandated, High-Stakes Testing Program in Minnesota

Externally-mandated, high-stakes tests affect all aspects of schooling. But, although all aspects of the system are affected, most empirical research has concentrated on the impact of these testing programs at the classroom-, teacher-, or student-level (Schleisman, 1998). What research has not done, however, is examine the structural responses of schools to an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program (at least not in any depth). By structural responses, I mean school-level policies and practices, such as changes in course offerings, changes in school-day or school-year organization, or changes in access to remedial help, which might include additional schooling opportunities such as after school programs, Saturday school, or summer school programs.

Thus, at the level of school policies and practices, the literature is lacking. Although educators have acknowledged that changes to school policies and practices occur as a result of externally-mandated, high-stakes testing programs, an in-depth examination of what specifically these changes are has not been conducted. This study investigated one school district's changes in policies and practices (at the school-level and district-level) as a result of the implementation of an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program in the state of Minnesota.

The State Context

In 1993, the Minnesota state legislature passed a law requiring the State Board of Education and the Department of Children, Families, and Learning (DCFL) to develop a results-oriented Graduation Rule. One component of the Graduation Rule focuses on basic standards, which define the minimum competency in reading, mathematics, and writing that a student must possess before graduating from a Minnesota public high school. [Note that the writing assessment will not be considered here, because the writing assessment is not administered as part of the MBST and it was initially implemented just last year.] The basic standards are measured by the administration of the Minnesota Basic Standards Test (MBST). The MBST is a minimum competency, high-stakes test. Students are administered the MBST beginning in 8th grade, and all students must pass the MBST before they can graduate.

The rhetoric around the adoption of this statewide testing program is that no child will "slip through the cracks." No longer will students be able to earn a high school diploma simply by attending classes for four years, and without being able to read, write, and calculate basic math problems. Proponents of this externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program in Minnesota claim that the Graduation Rule will insure that every student will graduate with a minimum competency of knowledge in three core areas (reading, math, writing).

For children who have trouble passing the MBST, policymakers claim that "local districts offer a variety of services to students who do not pass the tests" (http://www.educ.state.mn.us). Using test scores, educators will make changes in order for students to achieve success. Policymakers purport that "the results of these tests can help school districts make decisions about what and how they teach" (http://www.educ.state.mn.us).

Part of the legislation for the Graduation Rule states that the results of the MBST be published, which adds an accountability component to the Graduation Rule. Subd. 3 of Statute 121.1113 states that "the commissioner shall report test data publicly and to stakeholders" (http://www.educ.state.mn.us). According to information provided on the DCFL website, the testing results are used in the following ways:

- They measure the success of schools and districts in improving student achievement over time.
- They generate information for school improvement and accountability.
- They allow for identification of programming and strategies that work.
- They allow for comparison of schools and districts in Minnesota.

Because Minnesota schools are now more accountable to the public, they must find ways for students to succeed. The premise of the accountability movement is that if you hold people accountable, they will change their practices and policies in order to improve outcomes. Before discussing the specifics of this study, however, I will provide some background information regarding externally-mandated, high-stakes tests and educational accountability policies.

Background

Testing is sacrosanct in American education, at least for policymakers. "The caveats and reservations of many psychometricians have not been able to reduce the importance of the role assigned to testing by legislators and state board members..." (Madaus, 1985b, p. 611). The American public and policymakers see "...testing as an objective, scientific, and technological totem" (Madaus, 1985b, p. 615), and they do not question the use of testing "as an administrative mechanism to implement policy" (Madaus, 1985a, p. 5; see also Airasian, 1987; Madaus, 1985b).

The role of testing programs has changed, however, since the late 1960s. No longer are testing programs used only for classroom-level diagnosis or even district-wide informational purposes; rather, standardized tests are increasingly being used in state or national policy "for lobbying within the sphere of policy making, rather than within the sphere of pedagogical practice" (Madaus, 1985b, p. 614). Madaus (1985b) states that "early tests were designed not to certify individuals or to make comparisons among school districts but to predict and select within local districts and schools, to identify individual learning needs, to group youngsters, and to compare local performance with national norms" (p. 612). Starting as early as the late 1960s, however, testing began to be used for a variety of policy-oriented purposes (Airasian & Madaus, 1983; Baker, 1989; Cibulka, 1990; Madaus, 1985b; McDonnell, 1994a; Rothman, 1995), such as: "assessing educational equity; providing evidence on school and program effectiveness; allocating compensatory funds to school districts; evaluating teacher effectiveness; accrediting school districts; classifying students for remediation; and certifying successful completion of high school or a given grade of elementary school" (Airasian & Madaus, 1983, p. 103; see also Rothman, 1995). [For a more detailed analysis of the historical reasons for why this shift in assessment policy occurred, see Madaus (1985b), Madaus and Kellaghan (1992), Perrone (1979), Rothman (1995), or Resnick (1980).]

Note that this shift in the way tests are used has also resulted in a shift over who controls the testing program. Although many schools may still have internal testing programs (i.e., testing programs that are mandated by the school principal or the district superintendent), just as many schools are also subject to externally-mandated testing programs. Madaus (1988) defines external testing programs as testing programs that are controlled by and/or mandated by outside authorities, such as state legislatures or state departments of education. Another common feature of externally-mandated testing programs is that important decisions are made based on the results of these tests, making these tests "high-stakes" (Woolfolk, 1993; see also Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Corbett & Wilson, 1991). Note that "a test can be considered high stakes if the results of the test have perceived or real consequences for students, staff, or schools" (Langenfeld, Thurlow, & Scott, 1997, p. 1; see also Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Madaus, 1988; Madaus & Kellaghan, 1992). For example, test scores are used to track students into ability groups; to determine whether a child is ready to start school; to decide who should be promoted or retained in a grade or can graduate from high school; and to compare the quality of education in the U.S. versus another country or the quality of education among states or school districts (Darling-Hammond, 1991, 1995; Madaus & Pullin, 1991; National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, 1990; Neill & Medina, 1989; Nelson, Carlson, & Palonsky, 1996; Woolfolk, 1993).

The Accountability Function of Externally-Mandated, High-Stakes Testing Programs

McDonnell (1994a) argues that these externally-mandated, high-stakes testing programs serve an accountability (or regulatory) function. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the public voiced concern over accountability issues (i.e., the public wanted to know whether they were getting their money's worth from public education and that certain standards were being upheld). In order to meet these public demands for accountability, policymakers looked to standardized tests as one way to implement accountability policies.

The accountability function of assessment policy includes using tests (1) to demonstrate that students have attained an agreed-upon level of knowledge or mastered a set of standards (e.g., certification tests); or (2) to hold schools, teachers, and administrators accountable to the public for student performance on the test. Accountability is defined as "the systematic collection, analysis and use of information to hold schools, educators and others responsible for student performance" (Education Commission of the States, 1998, p. v; see also Bernauer & Cress, 1997). The underlying assumptions of the accountability function are as follows:

> Schools should be held accountable to the public, and rewards and sanctions are a mechanism for ensuring greater accountability. Improved student achievement is a critical component of accountability. Assessments can measure achievement consistent with public expectations, provide a guide for how teaching should change, and serve as the basis for distributing rewards and sanctions. Material incentives will motivate educators to change their teaching to be consistent with the assessment. Greater accountability will lead to changed teaching and, hence, to improved student achievement. (McDonnell, 1994a, p. 412)

Thus, the reliance on the accountability function of assessment policy stems in part from the belief of many policymakers and proponents of high-stakes testing that rewards, sanctions, or some type of consequence are necessary to stimulate action or motivation on the part of students, teachers, administrators, or schools (McLaughlin, 1991). In terms of students, for example, Madaus (1991; see also 1985b) states that "fear of a low score on a certification test is intended to motivate a target population of lazy, recalcitrant, or otherwise unmotivated students to work hard" (p. 228).

In terms of schools, the organizational theorist Mintzberg (1983, as cited in Corbett & Wilson, 1991) claims that organizations often turn to an outcome-oriented framework to stimulate action or change within the organization. Externally-mandated testing programs have been instituted to "generate school reform activity at the local level. By holding local educators accountable for clearly defined student outcomes, the expressed hope is that school district operations will change and become associated with ever-improving student learning" (Corbett & Wilson, 1991, p. 1). In essence, policymakers want instruction to improve at the local level, but they have no direct way of influencing what happens in the classroom. Thus, one way that policymakers and other stakeholders influence the educational system is by adopting externally-mandated, high-stakes testing programs that are coupled with rewards or sanctions (Haertel, 1989; Madaus, 1985b; Madaus & Kellaghan, 1992).

Translating the Premise of the Accountability Movement Into a Theory of Action

One can translate the "premise of the accountability movement" into a model of what people (policymakers, the general public, and so forth) believe will happen when an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing policy is adopted. In the evaluation literature, these types of models have been called the program's (or policy's, in this case) theory of action (Patton, 1997; Weiss, 1997).

A theory of action may be implicit (assumed) or explicit (specifically stated). This theory of action identifies a sequence of events and the anticipated effect. Patton (1997) defines a theory of action as "the full chain of objectives that links inputs to activities, activities to immediate outputs, immediate outputs to intermediate outcomes, and intermediate outcomes to ultimate goals" (p. 218); that is, it is "a means-ends hierarchical chain of objectives" (p. 153). The theory of action specifies the series of assumptions that underlie a program or policy in terms of the causal mechanisms that explain how a policy is intended to work. Every step of the theory of action provides an opportunity for evaluation. However, before specifying a theory of action for this study, I will present some of the assumptions commonly held for educational accountability systems—specifically, assessment-based educational accountability systems.

Background on assessment-based educational accountability systems. Policymakers and proponents of testing programs use a number of interrelated arguments for instituting assessment policies; these arguments the basis for developing the theory of action. The following statement by Lieberman (1991; see also Linn,

1993) touches on several of these reasons (note that although Lieberman is addressing the proposal of a national test put forth in the early 1990s, similar arguments are used by states when instituting externally-mandated, high-stakes assessment policies):

> Underlying the proposal for national testing are the assumptions that uniform tests will improve the education system as a whole, that instruction will necessarily improve as a result, and that teachers and students will benefit. The tests are supposed to measure the most important outcomes of schooling—those for which the education system should be held accountable—while providing direction and motivation for teachers and students. They will become the standard by which the public can measure success or failure. (p. 219)

By dissecting the above quote, one can see that testing policy is being advocated as a source of motivation for teachers and students, as an accountability mechanism to the public, as a way to determine desirable outcomes of schooling, as a way to demonstrate that students have attained an agreed upon level of knowledge or mastered a set of standards, and so forth. Note that a particular educational accountability system may serve one or several of the purposes listed above (Claycomb, Kysilko, & Roach, 1997); however, "in a standards-based accountability system, the most obvious purpose is *to monitor, evaluate and publicly report the progress of students, schools and districts toward achievement of content standards and other established goals*" (Education Commission of the States, 1998, p. 10, italics in original).

By imposing some consequence in connection with test results, the theory is that attention to the externally mandated standards will increase, ineffective practices will be identified and rectified, and student achievement will increase (Stecher, Barron, Kaganoff, & Goodwin, 1998; see also Rothman, 1995). The test is seen as the impetus for change, and schools can (and must, because of the accountability component) accept the challenge to use the test as an impetus for change in order to improve learning (and outcomes). The hope is that the likelihood of *good* practices occurring for students will increase and the likelihood of harmful practices for students will decrease.

Some examples. Stecher & Barron (1999) propose a model (or theory of action) of a test-based state accountability system. In their model, the state testing policy, which includes a testing program component and a standards component, is hypothesized to impact student outcomes (i.e., their knowledge, skills, and attitudes), classroom practices (such as student grouping, instruction techniques, and curricular decisions), and school policies (such as selection of curriculum, professional development). They explain that:

> Schools provide the educational services that help students achieve the desired goals. School administrators set local policies and teachers implement specific classroom practices to promote student achievement. As a result of their classroom experiences, students acquire knowledge, master skills and develop attitudes toward learning. These student outcomes are compared to the standards [set by the state testing policy—in Minnesota's case, minimum competency in math and reading] to determine whether schools have been successful. Information about school performance is reported to the schools and to the general public. Schools enact changes based on these reports to improve the services they provide and enhance student outcomes. (no pages given)

Chapman (November 10, 1998, personal discussion) outlined another theory of action that could be associated with the high-stakes testing, accountability movement. In his theory, the ultimate goal is improved student performance, and policymakers (and other stakeholders) believe that adopting an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing policy will stimulate certain actions on the part of schools, educators, and the public. For example, the testing policy will lead to a change in (1) what is taught in school, (2) the instructional strategies used, (3) the motivation level of students and teachers, and (4) the public's attention to educational matters.

Common features of assessment-based educational accountability theories of action. The theories of action associated with the assessment-based educational accountability movement have several features in common: (1) a purpose(s) or ultimate goal(s); (2) an intervention; and (3) hypothesized means for achieving goal (i.e., the processes and activities that are theorized to occur as a result of the intervention, which

should then lead to the ultimate goal). Common goals include increasing student achievement (or some variation on that theme, such as improving student outcomes) and holding schools and districts accountable. In these models, adopting an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing *policy* is seen as the "intervention" that will stimulate people to do what is needed (i.e., the hypothesized processes and activities) to achieve the ultimate goal(s).

The Proposed Model

As mentioned above, one component of Minnesota's results-oriented graduation rule focuses on basic standards, which define the minimum competency in reading and mathematics that a student must possess before graduating from a Minnesota public high school. The purpose (or ultimate) goal of the minimum competency requirement is twofold: (1) to hold students, schools, and districts accountable; and (2) to improve student achievement (at least to some minimum level) in the areas of reading and math. The "intervention" is the minimum competency testing policy [the status of goal achievement will be measured by performance on the Minnesota Basic Standards Test (MBST)].

Although there are a variety of levels at which the above model could be developed, what was of interest in this study was the link between Minnesota's externally-mandated, high-stakes testing policy and improved student achievement; that is, what would happen at the school- and district-level as a result of this policy that would lead to the ultimate goal of improved student achievement (as measured by test performance on the MBST)? [Note that one could also develop the model at the state-level, the classroom-level, the student-level, and so forth. One could also look at inputs or outcomes rather than processes (i.e., activities or actions).] The list of activities (processes) that the "intervention" is hypothesized to stimulate was developed based on a review of the literature (Claycomb, Kysilko, & Roach, 1997; College of Education and Human Development, 1996; Education Commission of the States, 1998; Madaus, 1985b; McDonnell, 1994b; Popham, 1987; Stecher, Barron, Kaganoff, & Goodwin, 1998); however, because I conducted a qualitative study using a semi-structured interview protocol (described below), the "discovery" of additional processes to add to the model is also possible.

Figure 1 shows the theory of action that was developed for this study, which examined the adoption and implementation of the testing policy at the school- and district-level.

Insert Figure 1 here

In this model, it is hypothesized that in order to meet the ultimate goal of improved student achievement in the areas of reading and math, the following things will happen as a result of the testing policy; that is, the adoption and implementation of the testing policy will:

- help schools identify students who may otherwise have "slipped through the cracks";
- force schools to offer a variety of services for students who need remedial work (i.e., they are at-risk of not passing or have not passed the MBST);
- bring greater curricular coherence to the system; and
- provide information for program/school improvement.

Study Rationale and Research Question

This theory of action articulates what people *expect* will happen as a result of adopting an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program; however, the Summer 1998 issue of *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* highlights the importance and necessity of documenting what *actually* happens as a result of the adoption of an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program (e.g., Yen, 1998). The goal of carefully documenting what happens in schools as a result of the adoption of a new testing program "is to develop specific concrete examples that will enhance our understanding about the ways in which tests can and do work

in local contexts and about the potential slippage between what we well-meaningly intend and what we in fact effect" (Moss, 1998, p. 11).

This study investigated the school-level and district-level changes in policies and practices as a result of the adoption and implementation of an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program in the state of Minnesota. The primary research question was the following: "What are the school-level and district-level responses to the implementation of an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing program in the state of Minnesota?" Fitting the information obtained in the study into the theory of action proposed in Figure 1 allows us to investigate whether the assumptions about what will occur in schools and districts are warranted.

Methodology

Although the main purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth look at one school district's responses to an externally-mandated, high-stakes testing policy, this study also served as a pilot study to help determine the most efficient means of gathering similar information from schools throughout the state of Minnesota (still to be determined). Thus, the information presented in this paper comes from only one school district. An advantage of using only one school district is that the context in which change is occurring at the school-level will be more consistent than if I had sampled school sites from a variety of school districts.

The Site Context

The school district used for this study serves several communities and is considered a suburban school district in the state of Minnesota. The district serves approximately 14,000 students, and has 3 high schools, 4 middle schools, and 12 elementary schools. Note, however, that this study focused on middle schools and high schools only. Because the MBST is first administered to students in 8th grade, the middle schools and high schools would be most likely to change in response to the MBST (at least in the first years of implementation of this new testing policy).

The Interview Instrument and Respondent Information

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of this district's responses to the MBST, a qualitative methodology was used. Qualitative methods provide a rich, holistic description and analysis of a phenomenon. Interviews were chosen as the data collection method because they are useful for obtaining information that cannot be directly observed and for finding out "what is 'in and on someone's mind'" (Merriam, 1988, p. 72). Because I did not want to limit the production of ideas from the interviewees, an open-ended, semi-structured interview protocol was used. Patton (1987) states that "the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms" (p. 142). Also, Patton (1987) states that "interviews are a source of meaning and elaboration for program observations" (p. 109), which is precisely the type of information necessary for this study.

The sample was purposive and included key people at both the district- and school-level. Key people were those people who could provide detailed information about the school-level and district-level changes taking place as a result of the MBST. At the district level, I interviewed key people in the following areas: teaching and learning, district curriculum specialists, limited English proficiency, special education, student services/minority populations, and research and evaluation. At the school level, I interviewed principals, counselors, and/or teachers (this varied by site).

The focus of the study included: (1) interviewees' perceptions of how the district or schools had changed since the introduction of the Minnesota Basic Standards Test (MBST); (2) current and/or future responses (or changes) made as a result of the MBST; and (3) needs at the building and/or district level.

Interviewees were asked about the specific responses that have occurred in their district or their schools. For example, they were asked about changes in school-day and school-year restructuring efforts (e.g., adding -school or summer school programs), changes in school organization and administrative practices (e.g.,

changes in course offerings, altering of student placement policies), and remediation opportunities. For each specific response mentioned, follow-up questions were asked in order to gain further understanding of the response, such as (1) what remediation opportunities are offered? (2) who qualifies for those opportunities? (3) how are students selected for remediation opportunities? and (4) when is remediation provided (i.e., during regular school hours, in after-school or summer school programs)?.

Data Analysis

This study was conducted for two different purposes. From an educational policy perspective, it is important to document what schools and districts are doing to improve results (as discussed above). From a district perspective, it is important to document what is being done because of concerns over "opportunity to learn" issues and for district or school planning purposes.

For each school or district department, the data were summarized on a variety of dimensions, which included:

- general information about a program or school;
- responses specific to the subjects areas of reading, mathematics, and writing;
- summer school, after-school, or tutoring opportunities;
- communication to parents;
- staff development;
- tools or assessments used; and
- identified needs.

Each school and district department received a copy of the matrix developed for that specific school or area; they also received the matrices developed for all other schools and district departments. I developed a list of general findings based on the information contained in the matrices and comments made by interviewees. I present a summary of the matrices and general findings in the next section.

Findings

Part of conducting a "good" qualitative study is sorting through the multitude of data obtained and organizing it in such a way as to be useful and meaningful for your audience. Clearly, summary tables of *all* of the responses for each school and district department were useful and meaningful for the school district, especially for "opportunity to learn" reporting. However, reporting the information in these same tables to an audience more interested in the implications of a policy for schools, districts, and their administrators would certainly be less meaningful to that audience. Thus, I am going to combine the "results" and "interpretation" sections, in order to try to make the findings more meaningful.

The theory of action presented above is a useful framework within which to consider the responses of this school district to Minnesota's externally-mandated, high-stakes testing policy. Fitting the information obtained in the study into the theory of action proposed in Figure 1allows us to investigate whether the assumptions about what will occur in schools and districts are warranted. That is, using the information obtained here, we can analyze what actually happens in schools versus what was expected to happen, based on the theory of action.

Testing Policy Helps Schools Identify Students Having Trouble in Reading and/or Math

In general, the educators in this district felt that one of the most positive aspects of the adoption and implementation of Minnesota's basic standards testing policy is that it has served to highlight the needs of some students, who otherwise may have "slipped through the cracks." Although some of the educators interviewed had been concerned about these at-risk students all along, they attributed the increased attention that all educators were giving to the development of skills in these students to the adoption of the basic standards testing policy. The LEP (limited English proficiency) coordinator told how "before this test the kids

could breeze through classes, get credits, and graduate with very minimal proficiency in English." He felt that with the adoption of the testing policy, which requires that LEP students pass the test, more attention was being paid on helping these students increase their reading and math proficiency.

One principal commented that it has forced them to "look more at remediation than in years past." He said they now "look at the skills students must have and design courses appropriately." A middle school principal explained how his math and reading and language arts departments use the information from the district-level achievement test to "see where the holes are, the deficiencies and then work with those students in seventh and eighth grade." One of the district administrators emphasized that there has been "an increased focus on reading and literacy in the elementary schools" and that "many elementary schools are adding reading specialists to their staff." The district curriculum specialist in reading remarked that this policy has forced the district to focus on the needs of certain students, as well as on the importance of reading in general for all students.

Testing Policy Forces Schools to Address Remediation Needs

Stecher and Barron's (1999) test-based accountability model suggests that schools will use information about school performance on the high-stakes test to make changes that will "improve the services they provide and enhance student outcomes" (no page given). Minnesota policymakers and the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning state that "local districts offer a variety of services to students who do not pass the tests" (http://www.educ.state.mn.us) and that "the results of these tests can help school districts make decisions about what and how they teach" (http://www.educ.state.mn.us). These ideas were incorporated into the specific theory of action model proposed above; that is, the testing policy will force schools to offer a variety of services for students who need remedial work (i.e., they are at-risk of not passing or have not passed the MBST).

Tables 1-4 show that the district, the high schools, and the middle schools have responded to the needs of students (particularly those students who have not passed the MBST or who are at risk of not passing the test in 8th grade) in a variety of ways.

Insert Tables 1-4 here

Table 1 demonstrates the activity that was generated at the high school level in order to respond to the needs of students who have not passed the reading and/or math portions of the MBST. During the regular school day, students can practice math skills with a teacher in the math resource room or use a tutorial program available in the computer learning center. Remedial reading and math classes have also been developed.

Table 2 provides a summary of the responses that the middle schools have made to the MBST. A site-based summer school offering student-specific remediation is available for students who have been identified as needing extra help in reading and/or math. Remedial reading classes are offered to seventh and eighth grade students; however, students who enroll in the remedial classes must then miss out on some other elective class (i.e., health, social studies, keyboarding, or a foreign language, depending on the grade-level of the student and the individual middle school). Although many of the responses at the middle school level are to support students at-risk of failing (i.e., students identified as needing remedial opportunities), the middle schools have increased their focus on the basic skills in reading and math for all students. For example, the middle schools are sponsoring book fairs several times a year, reading contests throughout the year, and so forth.

Tables 3 and 4 show how the district math and reading curriculum departments have responded to the needs of students and teachers in the district. The district curriculum specialists describe their roles as "resource" people; that is, they do not dictate school and/or teacher practices, rather they offer information and support. For example, the district math curriculum specialist worked with other educators in the district to create readiness packages for students in grades 2-7 and remediation packages for students who have not passed est (see Table 3). These packages contain practice tests, worksheets, and useful math vocabulary. Math

resource notebooks have also been created for teachers that include the learner outcomes for each grade, research-based information on best practice, supplemental worksheets, and pretests. Table 4 shows that the district reading curriculum specialist has worked with middle and high school teachers to develop remedial courses (offered either during the school day or during summer school).

The data obtained in this study indicate that the schools and district have largely utilized familiar models of student grouping (i.e., put all the students having trouble into one class and try to remediate them), remediation ("more of the same"), and test-preparation techniques (drill and skill, practice tests)—at least for the students at-risk of not passing the MBST. Many of the educators in this district expressed frustration over the need for more information about "best practices" regarding, for example, how to teach reading to older students or to second language learners still struggling with reading. Several principals stated that they would like to hire more reading specialists who could provide staff development on how best to help older readers and second language learners, but they have found it very difficult to find people qualified for these positions. Several people were concerned that without this information on "best practices" in reading, the remedial classes may offer only "more of the same" approaches to remediation (which one could argue are not working, since the students are still struggling with reading at 7th, 8th, and 9th grade).

The educators acknowledged, however, that the pressure to help students pass the test (so that they can graduate from high school) makes it difficult to (feel that there is time to) try new, less researched techniques (not to mention the accountability pressure of test scores decreasing within the district). Stecher and Barron (1999) found that "given limited time and resources, schools often direct their attention more narrowly to practices that will enhance student performance on the tests. This is one way in which the discrepancy between broad goals and specific measures may reduce the effectiveness of a test-based accountability system" (no page numbers provided). The evidence in this pilot study suggests that contention; that is, although the tables clearly demonstrate that this district has responded with a large number of actions, many wish that these actions were coupled with more information on "best practices."

Testing Policy Brings Greater Curricular Coherence to the System

In both reading and mathematics, the district has taken steps to bring greater curricular coherence to the system. Table 3 shows that the district has adopted a new math curriculum for the middle schools and high schools. This new curriculum "reinforces the eight strands of the MBST math portion"; thus, the district math curriculum is not only aligned from middle school to high school, but it is also aligned with the state test. Table 4 shows that the district has adopted a new K-6 reading series that all elementary schools began using in the fall of 1999. Although there is now greater curricular coherence in the system, one middle school principal felt that even more should be done to create common curricula and instructional practices within the district. This particular principal believes that "site-based decision-making has made things too horizontal" and that 80% of what is done should be common across schools. Others commented on the need to continue working on K-12 alignment of the curriculum.

One area in which the educators in this district felt that more discussions were needed regarding curricular coherence was at the intersection of mainstream, LEP, and special education curriculum, particularly with regard to remedial coursework. The mainstream perspective on remedial classes is that the LEP and special education students would receive remediation in their special education or LEP classes and, thus, would not need to be included in mainstream remedial classes. The special education and LEP perspective is that the money and decisions are in the hands of mainstream educators, and yet their students *do* need to be included in "mainstream" remedial classes; thus, these groups often felt left out of the discussions about remedial opportunities.

Testing Policy Stimulates the Use of Information for Program/School Improvement

The Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning states that the test results will be used to "generate information for school improvement." As one educator noted, Minnesota's testing policy does force [illegible]cts to "look at student achievement." "We need to know that our students are achieving at a certain level;

students need to graduate with at least those competencies measured by the test." Thus, the testing policy "has clear implications for building improvement plans." In fact, the district's strategic plan was described as "a tool that creates alignment between teacher plans and building plans, building plans and district plans, district plans and state plans...to develop a strategic plan at any level, one must specify the following components: goals (i.e., what do you want to accomplish?), indicators of goal accomplishment, and ways in which the district can provide support."

The Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning also states that the test results will "allow for identification of programming and strategies that work." However, the principals in this district recognized a need for improved uses of data to inform decisions. They still found themselves *responding* to the needs versus using data to *plan* interventions. They were not using data to determine which interventions were working (or not) or which ones were working for some students and not for others. The educators expressed the desire to use data to determine skill areas where students are lacking so that they could design appropriate courses and interventions and use data to determine which interventions are working; however, they did not feel that they had the knowledge or capacity to do that (yet). Thus, although CFL claims that districts and schools will use the information from the tests to make changes and plan interventions, it may not be the case that schools are able to do that effectively. The district research, evaluation and assessment specialist in this district is trying to help schools use data—Table 5 clearly shows that this school district is trying to help its principals and teachers use data to make programming decisions at the individual student level, as well as at the building level.

Insert Table 5 here

In summary, the types of activities and processes happening at the school- and district-level fit the types of activities and processes that were expected, according to the theory of action model, to happen at the school- and district-levels as a result of Minnesota's externally-mandated, high-stakes testing policy. However, it is important to note that another assumption of most accountability models is that schools and districts have the technology, resources, and people to make necessary changes. What is evident from this study is that the schools and district are making the changes for which they have the technology, resources, and people, but have noted the types of changes they would like to make—given access to different, or more, technology, resources, and people.

Conclusions

Hargreaves (as cited in Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, & Oakes, 1995) notes that studies usually have a defined unit of analysis and tend to consider either the macro or micro view. Hargreaves "calls upon educational researchers to focus on the middle range between the ethnographic study of classrooms and the large macro- or societal-level research and theory" (p. 21); thus, we do need more research on the processes at the middle range, such as studies that focus on the school-level, as this study did.

Studies are also needed that follow a macro policy through to its micro implementation, so that we can better understand what happens at all levels of implementation. By carefully delineating the theory of action at the policy-setting level (i.e., the macro level) in terms of what is expected to happen at the implementation level, it would be possible to investigate what actually happens for each component of that theory of action at the implementation-level. One advantage of examining both the macro and micro level in one study is that discrepancies between these levels could be highlighted. For example, in this study, the educators at the micro level stated a need for more reading specialists with knowledge of "best practices" as a result of the macro-level state testing policy; however, the state is currently revising the skill and knowledge requirements for reading licensure in the state and they are decreasing the requirements. This also suggests that examining the interaction of a variety of policy initiatives and their affect on the system is important, because this could, for example, create a tension at the implementation level between two macro-level policy initiatives.

Figure 1
School-Level Theory of Action for Minnesota's Externally-Mandated, High-Stakes Testing Policy

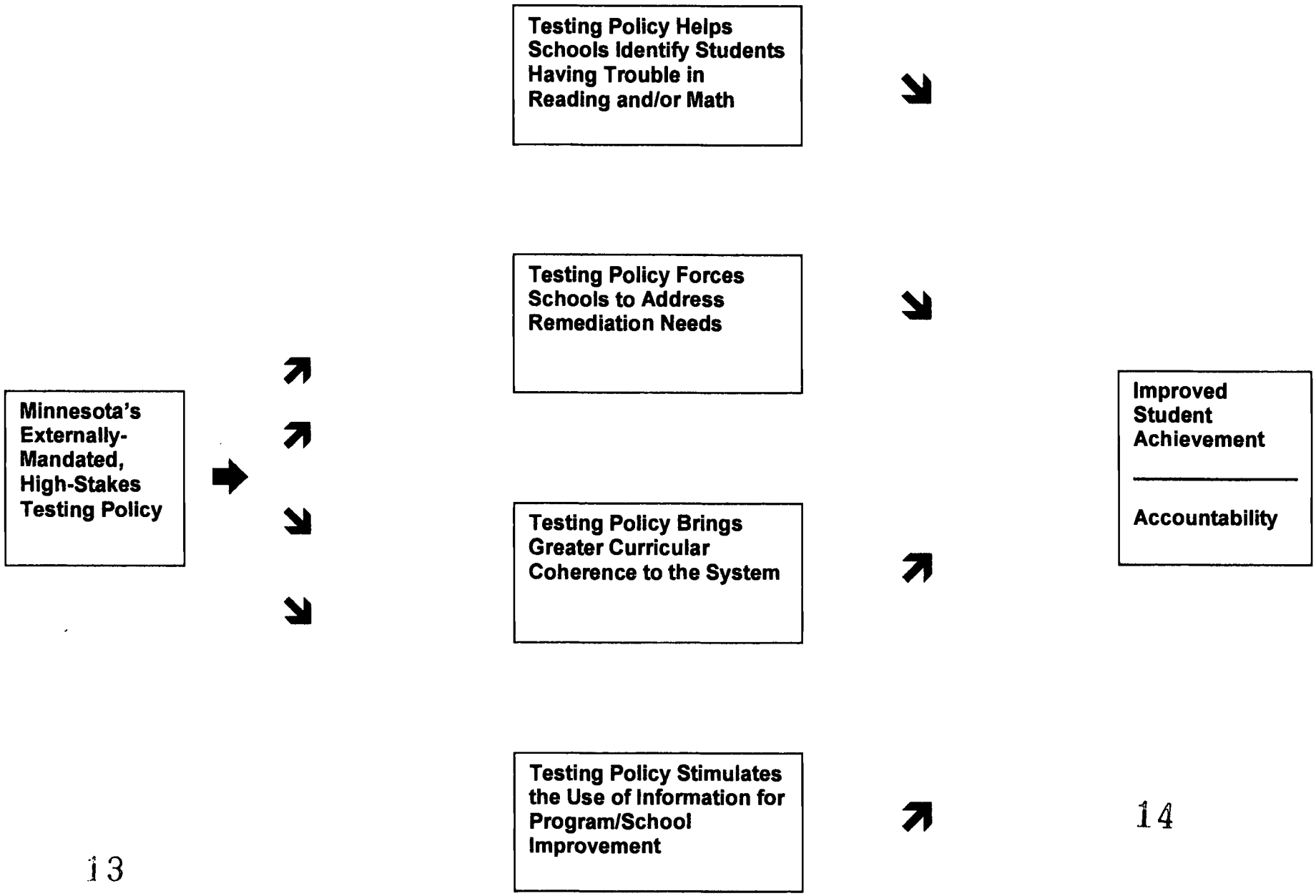

Table 1
Summary of One School District's Responses to the MBST at High School A

	PROGRAM IN GENERAL	READING	MATHEMATICS	SUMMER SCHOOL/AFTER SCHOOL/TUTORING OPPORTUNITIES	NEEDS
HIGH SCHOOL Note that all remediation opportunities are voluntary.	1. Counselors meet with any 11th grader who hasn't passed the MBST • A district ILP form is completed • Counselors explain the importance of passing the test and remediation options that are available and registers the student for those • Parents receive a copy of the ILP • Counselors also check all senior student records before the start of school for MBST pass/fail status, # of credits, etc. 2. Counselors meet with any 12th grader who hasn't passed the MBST and complete another ILP. 3. 9th and 10th graders who have not passed the MBST meet with counselors to register for summer school.	1. "Strategies for Reading" • Remedial reading course • Uses Accelerated Reader Program (a computer-based reading program) • Offered in Grades 10-12, aimed at 11th graders who have not passed the MBST • Can receive 1 English credit (but need 2) • Was not going to be offered 1999-2000, due to low enrollment; however, an English teacher has offered to teach this class in place of a supervisory duty each semester 2. One special section of 9th grade English • Offered to 9th grade students who have not passed the MBST • Although this class is voluntary, students are placed in this course unless parents object • Considerable focus on reading and reading skills remediation within the regular 9th grade English curriculum • Uses Accelerated Reader Program (a computer-based reading program) • Students receive English credit • Will no longer be offered because enrollment for that course was 22 students; thus, it increased the class sizes of the other 9th grade English classes (so students who failed the MBST will be placed in heterogeneous 9th grade English classes and will not receive remediation in their English classes). (This is due in part to the need for more FTEs.)	1. Math Resource Room • Students can use this room during any free hours • Offers a chance to practice math skills with a teacher • District math packets are available for use • No course credit for doing this 2. Math Class • A remedial math class was offered, but it has been cancelled due to low enrollment and the need for more FTE's 3. Pre-algebra math class • Basic skills review • Students spend January reviewing for the MBST • District remediation packets are used • Students take practice tests in district math packets and on State's website	1. District offers one-on-one tutoring for seniors who have not passed the MBST. 2. District offers summer school classes focused on passing the MBST for students who have not passed the MBST: • Both a reading and math course are offered • Course offers a basic skills and test preparation focus 3. Learning Lab • Available before, during, and after school • Part of the Computer Learning Center • No course credit, but supervised by a teacher • Tutorials available in math and reading 4. ALC (Area Learning Center) • Available after school • Part of the Computer Learning Center	1. Math and English Departments need more FTEs. More counselors are needed as well. 2. The district provides math remediation packets, but the schools must Xerox them for the students. This becomes a financial issue for the schools. 3. More remedial reading opportunities for students; for example, "Strategies for Reading" should be a year-long course. 4. Need to combine reading/writing emphasis. 5. Possibly, district should require that students take advantage of remediation opportunities that are offered; currently, all remediation opportunities are voluntary.

Table 2
Summary of One School District's Responses to the MBST at Middle School B

	PROGRAM IN GENERAL	READING	MATHEMATICS	SUMMER SCHOOL/ AFTER SCHOOL/ TUTORING	NEEDS
MIDDLE SCHOOL Note that all remediation opportunities are voluntary. The district is keeping the enrichment classes offered in summer school, but middle schools are offering site-based remediation classes.	1. Changed home base structure—it is now an advisory period. • Tuesday, Thursday: Silent reading (students can bring whatever they want to read) • Wednesday: Practice tests geared to MBST • Monday: Focus on math • Friday: Social day 2. Encourage students to have library cards and to go to the library. 3. Language Arts Department—reading is becoming part of their curriculum. 4. "Pep talks" by principal—meets with 8th graders 4 times/ year; stresses the importance of being serious in their daily work habits because that will help them pass the test. 5. Breakfast is served on test administration days. 6. The school newsletter stresses the importance of reading (for students and parents). During the summer months, students are encouraged to keep reading. 7. Language arts and math teachers met with parents of 8th graders and talked about how they can help get their kids ready for the test.	CCC Lab—"It's old, but we work that lab." • 6th graders use the lab as part of their day; 8th grade reading teacher uses the lab 3 days/week; 7th grade teacher uses it 2 days/week; Special ed uses the lab every day Reading Lab • New in 98-99 • Computer-based • Used with 8th graders after school and in the "school within a school" Remedial Reading Class • For 6th and 7th graders, scores on the District Achievement Test are used to determine placement. • Students in grade 7 who take this course miss out on keyboarding or health • Students in grade 8 who take this course miss out on foreign language District adoption of K-6 reading series Summer/Winter Break reading program—encourage students (and parents) to read. A Book Fair is held two times/year at the school. Reading contests held during the year—prizes are awarded (e.g., throw a pie in the principal's face).	District packets given to students with pretests, practice tests, vocabulary information CCC Lab: can practice math before and after school	Site-based summer school • Remediation focus • Cater to individual needs (student-specific remediation) • August summer school offered to students from feeder schools who need help on reading and math (so don't come in too behind) ALC program (after-school) • Students must meet ALC criteria to participate • Students can use the CCC Lab • Students can work on reading and math skills geared toward the MBST • Students can work on homework • Students can work on study skills • Enrichment opportunities CCC Lab • Students can use it before or after school • 8th graders use it for practice during the month of January	1. Expand the CCC Lab (from 30 to 60) 2. Hire a person to be on special assignment to work with teachers, students, and parents (e.g., host special classes for parents) 3. More reading and math contests (with rewards for students) 4. Home involvement • More parent groups • Need more communication—outreach activities in homes, churches, etc.

Table 3
Summary of Responses to the MBST at the District Level for Mathematics in One District

	TESTS/ASSESSMENTS	TOOLS	COMMUNICATION TO PARENTS	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	NEW COURSE OFFERINGS/ TUTORING OPPORTUNITIES	NEEDS
DISTRICT MATH Note that all remediation opportunities are voluntary.	District Achievement Level Test, administered in Grades 3-7 • Used to predict if a student will have difficulty passing the MBST in 8th grade • Used as a diagnostic tool; test items/scores analyzed by district personnel, diagnose where students having trouble, district provided this information and support to staff at the school-level Pretests are administered (in school classes) to students in the fall of 8th grade • Used as a diagnostic tool; test scores analyzed to determine which of the 8 strands students need the most work on MN Comprehensive Assessment, administered in Grades 3 and 5 • Used to predict if a student will have difficulty passing the MBST in 8th grade	District mandate is to address the learner outcomes at each grade level. The district math curriculum area provides support to do that in a variety of ways: <u>Readiness Packages for Grades 2-7</u> • Given to 6th and 7th grade students (sent home at end of 6th and 7th grade) • Packages are optional for 2nd-5th graders • Packages contain practice tests, worksheets, vocabulary (verbal definition, visual, symbolic), the 6 goals <u>Remediation Packages</u> • One for each of the 8 strands of the MBST math portion <u>New Math Program</u> • A new math curriculum • Reinforces the 8 strands of the MBST math portion	1. Readiness packets sent home with 6th and 7th grade students 2. Readiness packets for 2nd-5th graders are optional (e.g., may be provided to a parent at a parent-teacher conference) 3. Have offered parent help sessions (so that parents feel able to help their students with math)	1. Resource notebooks are available from the District Math Curriculum area (these contain the learner outcomes for each grade, research-based information on best practice, supplemental worksheets, pretests, performance assessment ideas) 2. District Math Curriculum area specialist met with middle school teachers 4-5 times during the year (talked about how to communicate with parents, how to share resources with other teachers, strategies for helping students translate word problems, etc.) 3. "Special (outside grant)" funds for professional development • Spring 1999, sent 25 math teachers to the state math conference	District supports one-on-one tutoring for seniors who have not passed the MBST. SUMMER SCHOOL: Classes are offered that focus on strategies for passing the MBST. Middle schools offer site-based programs; high schools offer a centralized summer school program run by the district. Classes may use computer-assisted learning techniques. Mondays, during Homebase in middle schools, teachers have been asked to work on solving word problems (using the packets provided by the District Math Curriculum area) Middle Schools provide extended-day opportunities through their Area Learning Centers (ALCs). High Schools offered a remedial math course (no longer offered due to low enrollment)	1. Money for postage so that Readiness Packets can be sent home, via mail, to parents and students (at the end of 6th and 7th grade). 2. Offer breakfast to all students on test-taking days. 3. Create resource notebook to be used by teachers new to the district (or to teaching).

Table 4
Summary of Responses to the MBST at the District Level for Reading in One District

	TESTS/ASSESSMENTS	TOOLS	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	NEW COURSE OFFERINGS/ TUTORING OPPORTUNITIES	COMMUNICATION TO PARENTS	NEEDS
DISTRICT READING Note that all remediation opportunities are voluntary. Note that district funds were made available to create the Research and Evaluation position.	District Achievement Level Test, administered in Grades 3-7 • Used to predict if a student will have difficulty passing the MBST in 8th grade MN Comprehensive Assessment, administered in Grades 3 and 5 • Used to predict if a student will have difficulty passing the MBST in 8th grade	<u>Reading Series</u> • New K-6 Reading Series (will be used beginning in Fall 1999) <u>K-2 Early Literacy Assessment</u> • Student assessment to be administered by teachers fall, winter, and spring • Ready for use in Fall '99	1. District-led staff inservicing was conducted previously, but no required district-led inservices are currently planned. 2. Inservicing is planned at the building-level, and the district staff works to support building ideas. 3. Harcourt-Brace will provide additional staff development options. 4. District-wide literacy leader position funded by GOALS 2000	District supports one-on-one tutoring for seniors who have not passed the MBST. SUMMER SCHOOL: Classes are offered that focus on strategies for passing the MBST. Middle schools offer site-based programs; high schools offer a centralized summer school program run by the district. Middle Schools provide extended-day opportunities through their Area Learning Centers (ALCs). High Schools have offered a remedial reading course	District Initiatives, in general (not just reading): • Communication to parents about the test (when it is administered, the importance of passing, and so forth) • Communicate results to parents and information about opportunities for remediation (such as summer school)	Build back FTEs for reading teachers. More district focus on the middle schools, both in terms of staff development and materials. More staff development time is needed so that teachers can talk about, and reflect on, their practice. In conjunction with that, more knowledge is needed about "best practices." Continue focusing on reading and literacy.

Table 5

Summary of Responses to the MBST at the District Level for the Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department in One District

	IN GENERAL	READING/MATHEMATICS	SUMMER SCHOOL/ TUTORING OPPORTUNITIES	STAFF DEVELOPMENT

RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT	• Prepare individual student profile report for seniors who have not passed by the January/February testing.
	
	• Notify parents of students who fail the test and alert them of remediation options and consequences of not passing.
	
	• Communicate to parents salient factors related to tests at grades 3, 5, 8, and 10:
	  • Test purpose
	  • Test preparation
	
	• Report achievement results to System Accountability members.
	
	• Continuously update the Student Profiles module of SASI so that individual test history is immediately available at the building.
	
	• Assist building teams with school improvement planning related to academic achievement.
	
	• Assist building administration, staff and parents with analysis and interpretation of data.
	
	• Develop and conduct evaluation of newly adopted reading series.
		• *Achievement Levels Test* given in grades 3-7 for reading and math. Results are measured on an absolute scale so an individual's progress can be measured continuously. Each test contains "strands" aligned to the reading/math curriculum. Individual and group scores are provided for each strand.
		
		• Grades 3 and 5: *Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment* (statewide testing in reading and math).
		
		• Grade 7: *Differential Aptitude Test.*
		  • Reading: "Verbal Reasoning" subtest sometimes used to help with placement decisions.
		  • Math: "Numerical Reasoning" and "Abstract Reasoning" subtests sometimes used to help with placement decisions.
		
		• Grade 8: *MBST.* State tests in reading and math—provide scores, score category, and scores on individual "strands" of the test useful for diagnosing students' strengths/weaknesses.
		
		• Grade 10: All students administered an assessment that includes measures of English, reading and math achievement. Some grade 10 students take the *PSAT* but scores are not reported centrally.
		
		• Grades 3-7: Quick testing on-line for students new to the district and lacking achievement data—used for placement.
			• Statewide testing opportunity for all students who have not yet passed or who were absent.
			
			• Arrange tutoring with ABE (Adult Basic Education) students for whom diplomas are withheld.
			
			• District provides one-on-one tutoring for seniors who have not passed the MBST before the April test.
				1. Provide service to buildings regarding:
				• Evaluation of programs/processes
				• Needs assessment
				• Development of measurement tools (i.e., surveys, focus groups)
				• Understanding purposes for various assessments
				• Program design/development

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